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ABSTRACT

This guide for parents provides information about how they can determine if their child is overweight and what they can do if their child has a weight problem. Replies to many common questions of parents are provided. The issues addressed include: (1) determining whether a child is too fat; (2) assistance that can be provided by health care workers; (3) the child's feelings about his or her weight; (4) communication between the parents and the child; (5) diet; (6) ways a parent can keep his or her child from overeating; (7) physical activity; and (8) helping overweight children with self-esteem. In addition, a list of foods from each of the four food groups, and sweets, fats, and snack foods, indicates which foods should be eaten often, sometimes, and rarely. Information about healthy and unhealthy ways of preparing food is also provided. (GLR)

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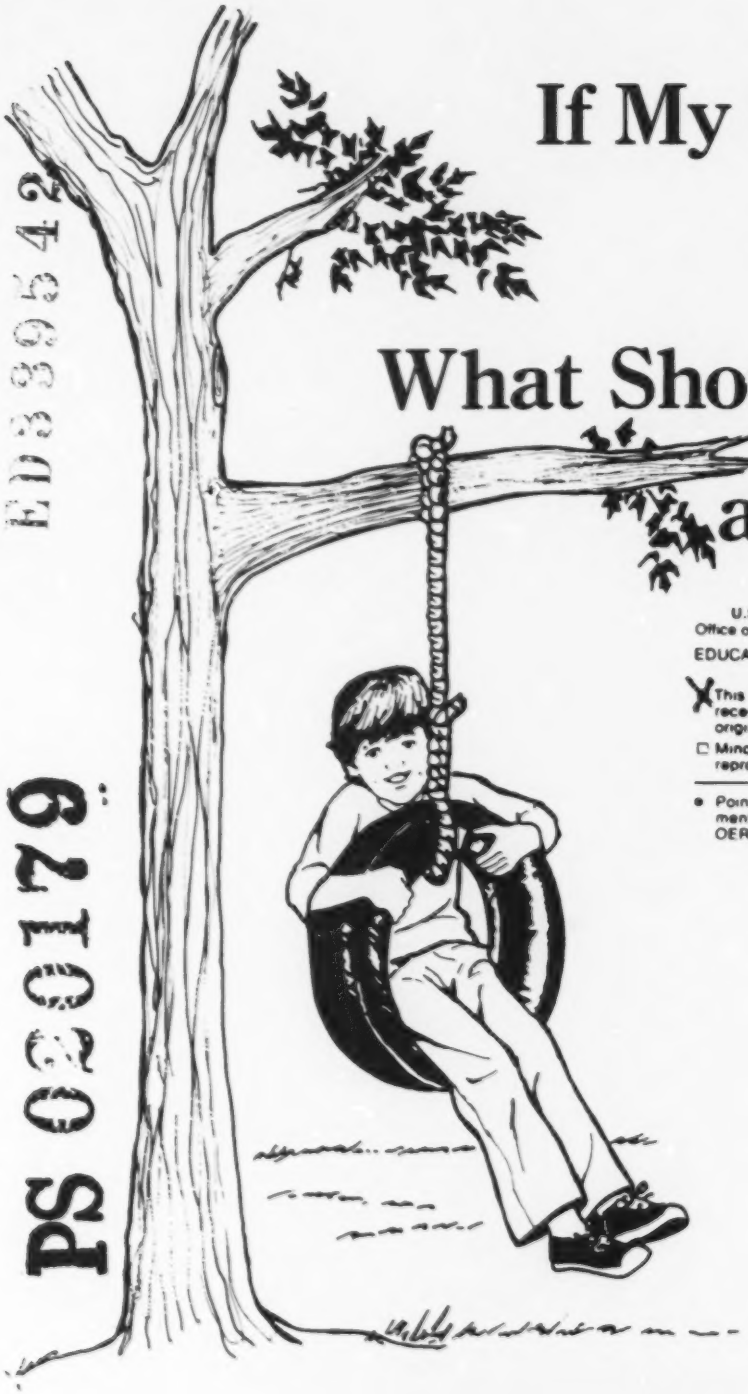
If My Child Is too Fat, What Should I Do about It?



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HE or SHE? HIM or HER? This leaflet gives equal time and space to both sexes. That's why we take turns referring to children as "he" or "she." Keep in mind that we are talking about all children when we use "he" or "she."

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IS MY CHILD TOO FAT?

How can I tell if my child is too fat?

As a parent, you may not be able to tell if your child is too fat. Your child may look heavy, but ask yourself, "Has my child put on weight lately but not grown taller?" Since growth in height and weight don't always happen at the same time, your child may "grow into" this heavier weight. On the other hand, perhaps your child has been heavy for some time and isn't "thinning out" as he gets taller.

Should I compare my child to other children the same age and sex?

Children come in many sizes. For example, 10-year-old girls usually weigh anywhere from 50 to 83 pounds. Ten-year-old boys ordinarily weigh between 57 and 90 pounds. There is nothing unhealthy about being at the high end of this range. Some children are going to be taller and heavier while others will be shorter and lighter. We expect children (and adults) to come in a variety of sizes and shapes. So comparing your child to other children may not tell you very much.

Who can tell me if my child is too fat?

The best person to tell you if your child is too fat is your health care provider. If you don't have a regular health care provider, make an appointment with a doctor, nurse, or registered dietitian. It will be easier for that person to decide if your child is overweight if you have a height-weight history for your child. If you have your child's height and weight at different ages since birth, take this information with you to an appointment with the health care professional.

How will the health care provider tell if my child is too fat?

During the appointment, your child will be carefully weighed and measured on equipment that gives correct information. (Home scales may be very inaccurate.) Then your child's height and weight along with past heights and weights will be placed on a growth chart. The growth chart has been developed by the National Center for Health Statistics and shows the range of healthy heights and weights for children.

By looking at your child's heights and weights on the chart, and by assessing your child's physique, and by asking you some questions about your own growth pattern as a child, the health care provider will be able to tell if your child is overweight. If this is the case, ask the health care professional for advice. Some of the questions often asked by parents, and the answers usually given by health care professionals, are on the following pages.

What if my child thinks she is fat but the health care provider doesn't think so?

It is not unusual for children to think they are too fat even when they aren't. They hear adults around them talking about weight all the time. Television programs, newspaper and magazine articles, and ads all feature the latest dieting information. Everyone talks about how to lose weight these days. Children pick up on these things. They want to be like adults so they begin to worry about weight just as the adults around them do.

Let your child know that the health care provider does not think she is too fat. Ask your child if she has been trying to eat less food in order to lose weight. If that is the case, tell your child that it's not a good idea to eat less because her body is still growing. Food has the nutrition needed for healthy growth. If your child continues to "diet" in order to lose weight, talk to your health care provider, as your child may not be growing normally because of it.

WHAT IF MY CHILD IS TOO FAT?

What should I say to my child about being fat?

Explain to your child, "You are larger than some other kids, and people notice that about you. It could be that you are meant to be big, but maybe not. It's hard to tell right now because you're still growing. What we are going to do is to help you eat and exercise in ways that will help you to be healthy so you will get the body that is right for you. We're going to have regular meals and snacks for the whole family. At meals and snacks, you can eat as much as you want. But I'd like you not to eat in between these regular meals and planned snacks because that's not good for you. And I'd like you to know that we're not going to put you on a diet because you're too young for that and it could hurt your body."

What will my child need to tell me?

Let your child tell you about his worries about being too fat. Most children know they have a weight problem; they have been teased or made fun of by classmates and others. If your child wants to share some of these experiences with you, listen quietly. Don't minimize the pain your child feels because of cruel behavior by others.

When your child is through, explain that people come in small, medium, and large sizes. Say that all people deserve love and respect no matter what their size and shape is, and reassure your child that you will love him forever, no matter how big or small he is.

Ask your child how other children at school deal with teasing. Let your child suggest some possible ways of dealing with it.

Should I talk to my child about becoming thinner?

You may be tempted to tell your child how she can go about becoming thinner, giving suggestions about weight management. But before you do, carefully consider how you are going to handle this conversation. Your child may not understand that you are trying to be helpful out of loving concern. Instead, your child may think that what you are really saying is, "I am not happy with your size and shape. I would love you more if you were thinner." In other words, your child may hear your concern as rejection. This can make your child feel less worthwhile as a person. It is important that your child feel good about herself. Your child needs to feel accepted by you and other important people in her life.

One possible way to approach this is to ask your child if she has any questions about body size, shape, or weight. Then answer the questions as factually as possible, using the information in this booklet. Another alternative is to ask your health care provider to explain weight management to your child. Children realize that it is the health care professional's job to offer health advice. They are less likely to interpret such explanations as rejection.

Should I limit the amount of food my child eats?

No. You should not feel you have to withhold food from your child in order to help your child lose weight. Restricting your child's eating can hurt rather than help. When a child is made to go hungry, he may become preoccupied with food. Whenever food is available, the child may overeat out of fear of going hungry again. All children should be encouraged to learn to eat until just satisfied and then stop. Children need to let their bodies' hunger cues tell them when hunger has been satisfied and when it's time to stop eating.

Telling children to "clean your plate" is a habit some parents get into at mealtime. This is a poor practice because it discourages children from eating until they are just full and then stopping.

Should I put my child on a low-calorie diet?

No, not unless your health care provider thinks it is necessary. Low-calorie diets can endanger normal growth. Even though your child may not need to gain weight, he will still be growing taller. A low-calorie diet may hamper this growth and is usually not recommended.

What kind of meals and snacks are best for my child?

Be sure to have regular meals and planned snacks as part of your family's routine. Irregular meals and uncontrolled snacking can lead to weight problems by causing unintentional overeating. A routine pattern of eating seems to help children and adults regulate their food intake so hunger is satisfied without overeating. It also helps children feel secure about being fed, and they don't need to worry about the possibility of being deprived of food.

Your child will benefit from eating foods that are rich in nutrients and moderate in calories. This is the same kind of food the entire family should be eating. There is no reason to put an overweight child on a "special" diet containing different foods from what the rest of the family eats.

A simple way to assure that everyone in the family gets the nutrients needed for growth, repair, and health is to include a variety of foods from each of the basic food groups in meals and snacks. The final page of this pamphlet has a chart showing the basic food groups. Within each group, foods are listed as "often," "sometimes," and "rarely."

A well-balanced diet will consist mainly of foods from the "often" list, with a few from the "sometimes" list, and occasionally one from the "rarely" list. If the family diet has consisted mainly of foods from the "sometimes" and "rarely" lists, it needs to be changed because it is fostering nutrition-related health problems for all members of the family.

What can I do to help my child from overeating?

Don't assume that because your child is overweight, he is overeating. A child who has been eating to satisfy hunger pangs is not overeating. But if your child is often nibbling on candy, cookies, chips, french fries, cupcakes, or sipping soft drinks, fruit punch, and the like, this is overeating and represents poor eating habits. Try to find out why your child is eating so much. Children don't normally overeat. If they do, there is a reason. It may be because meals and snacks are unreliable or irregular. Or, it could be that someone is encouraging the child to overeat. Is there a relative or caretaker who thinks that fat children are healthy and is always urging your child to eat? Or, your child may be overeating as a reaction to stress or depression. Talk with your child and find out how he is feeling. What is bothering him? Help your child learn to deal directly with feelings by encouraging the child to talk about them and figure out possible solutions to problems. Get help from your health care provider if you need it.

What should I tell my child about overeating?

Explain to your child that she needs to eat until no longer hungry and then it's time to stop eating. Say, "Let your stomach tell you when it's time to stop eating. When your stomach feels like it has enough food in it, don't put any more food in it." Assure your child that she will be allowed to eat regular meals and snacks but that it's important not to overfill her stomach.

What should be done about social situations like birthday parties where my child is going to be served high-calorie foods like cake and ice cream?

Allow your child to take part fully even though the child may eat more than usual. It is important that your child not be punished or set aside in any way because he is overweight. An important part of a healthy childhood is playing with other children and not being left out.

At first, your child may overeat at parties. However, after your child realizes that no one is going to stop him from having all he wants, there is less reason to overeat and the child is less likely to overeat.

It is important that both the parents and the child begin to trust the body's hunger cues and depend on them to decide how much food to eat. A child who has eaten a lot of food at a party will probably eat less food at mealtime and snack time. This is okay.

Should I keep high-fat and high-sugar snack foods out of reach of my child?

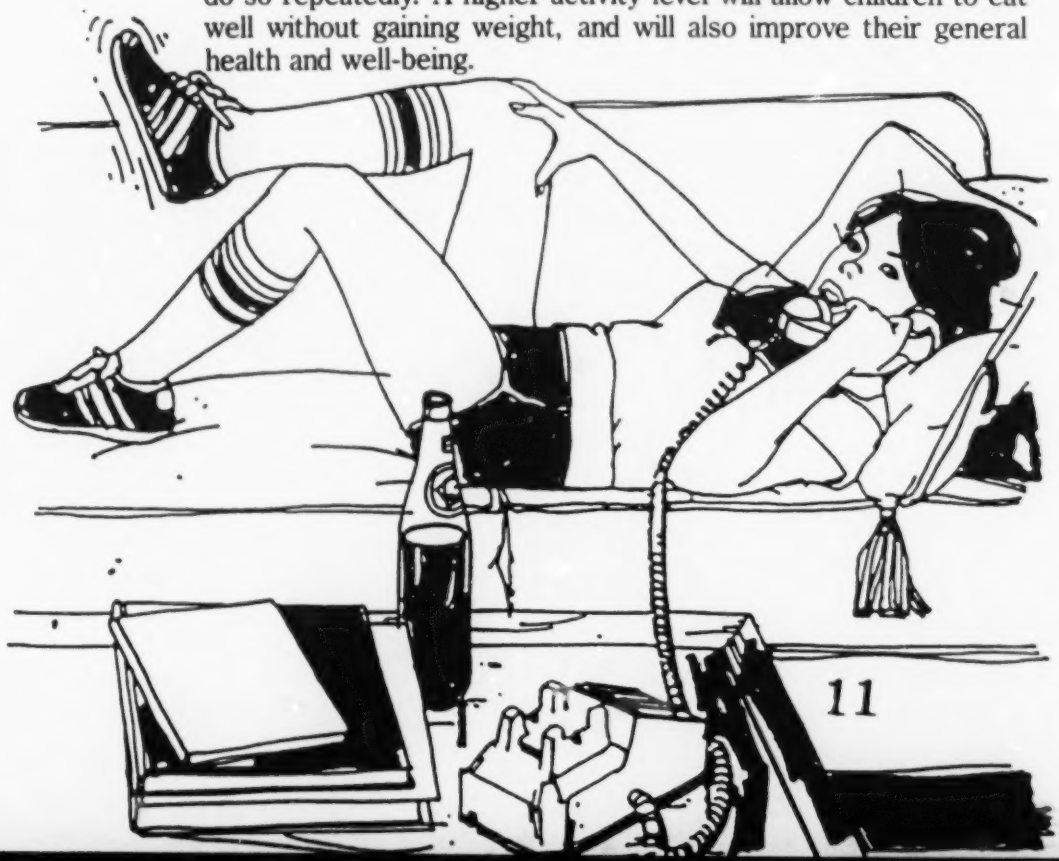
Snack foods like ice cream, potato chips, soda, snack crackers, cookies, cakes, cupcakes, and granola bars tempt children to overeat. It is best for parents to keep few, if any, on hand. Otherwise, parents find themselves hiding the food and eating it when the overweight child isn't around. Or they are always arguing with the child about whether the child can have some and how much the child can have. Better to avoid this by not bringing these foods into the home. However, it is important for the child to have regular snacks. Again, the foods listed under "often" on the last page of this pamphlet should be on hand.

What if my child doesn't eat that much food?

Recent studies show that overeating is not the major reason why many children become overweight. Inactivity appears to be more important. Children spend very little time actively playing these days. The average American child spends 24 hours a week watching television. This is more time than is spent on any other activity with the exception of sleep. There is an important relationship between the amount of time spent viewing television and children's weights. For each additional hour spent viewing television, the prevalence of obesity in children goes up by 2 percent.

A 16-year study that followed 185 children from 6 months to 16 years of age, found that the children who became fat as teenagers did not necessarily eat more than the children who were normal weight as teenagers. However, their activity levels were lower, even though some parents described their children as active.

It is very important that all children become more physically active. This is especially important for overweight children. Otherwise, in order to become slimmer these children may have to eat so little food that they are constantly hungry. It is really hard to resist eating when hungry, and children shouldn't be expected to do so repeatedly. A higher activity level will allow children to eat well without gaining weight, and will also improve their general health and well-being.



How can I help my child become more active?

Your child needs to run, jump, skip, hop, and move around more. Try to think of ways that will tempt your child to do this. Consider the possibility of your child joining an organized sports team. Provide her with the opportunity to join a soccer, softball, or basketball team.

Check out local parks and recreation departments. Many of them offer classes for very low fees. Perhaps your child would like to participate in aerobic dance, karate, gymnastics, tennis, or other kinds of classes.

Is there a public swimming pool that your child can swim at with family or friends? Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and 4-H encourage outdoor activities, maybe your youngster can join a troop or club?

Set up a badminton or volleyball net or tetherball in your yard if you have room. Hang a tire from a sturdy tree. Make a ping pong table out of scrap lumber. Encourage your child to invite a friend over. Give them material to blow bubbles with and chase in the backyard. Let them go to the school playground or recreation center to play wallball or to rollerskate or play on climbing equipment.

Perhaps the best thing you can do is to become active with your child. Invite your child to take a walk or bike ride after dinner each day. Take a picnic lunch on a hike through the woods or fly kites together on weekends. Have your child accompany you if you go to a health club to swim or work out. Check with the athletic director to see if it's safe for your child to join you. Make sure that physical activity doesn't turn into a competition between you and your child but is shared recreation that is fun for both of you.

Consider getting the family pet involved. Assign your child the chore of walking the dog each morning or evening. Maybe your child doesn't need a ride every place, let her walk to school or over to a friend's house.

Finally, actively support physical education and recreational activities as an integral part of the school curriculum. You may need to become an advocate for large children, making sure they aren't excluded from active participation. Activities need not be geared towards the most coordinated youngsters, but can involve youngsters of all abilities, sizes, and shapes.

What kinds of toys would help my child become more active?

Toys that encourage activity are jump ropes, roller skates, hula hoops, bicycles, baseballs, mitts and bats, basketball hoops, frisbees, kites, and all other toys that get children to run, jump, and play actively. Records or cassettes of dancing and marching music can help children enjoy the many movements they can do. None of these need to cost a lot. A large rubber ball may not look like a very exciting toy, but buy one and be pleasantly surprised at how much your child plays with it.

What about television?

Children who spend a lot of time watching television don't have much time left over for playing actively and doing homework. Find out just how much time your child actually spends watching television. It may be much more than you thought. Ask yourself what you consider a reasonable amount of television watching. Then take steps to limit television viewing to this amount of time. Your child will complain in the beginning but this is to be expected. Help your child use newly found "free" time to get involved in some of the activities mentioned earlier.

Don't make the mistake of eating meals in front of the television set. Soon watching television and eating will become simultaneous activities. You don't want your child to get into the habit of eating every time he watches television.

What if my child stays overweight?

It might be 6 months or a year before your child grows into his weight. If this doesn't happen, ask yourself these questions: (1) Is my child eating a fairly good diet? (2) Does my child play actively every day? (3) Do I limit the time my child spends watching television? If the answers to these questions are "yes," then you have made great headway towards helping your child adopt a healthy lifestyle. As a result, your child is certainly less overweight and healthier than he would be otherwise. Therefore, even though your child is not at the weight goal your health care provider may have suggested, you have helped your child make progress towards good health.

How can I help my overweight child face a possible lifetime of being overweight?

There is no doubt that our society values thinness. Being overweight may seem like the worst possible fate. However, it isn't. A worse fate is feeling rejected and unloved because one is overweight. You can make sure this does not happen to your child.

Reassure your child that she will be loved by you always, whether she is thin or fat. Help your child to feel good about herself so that overweight is not compounded by low self-esteem. Remember, there is no reason your child cannot lead a happy, productive, full life at whatever size she turns out to be.

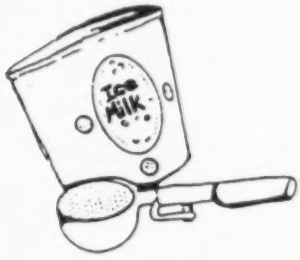
FOOD CHOICES FOR GOOD HEALTH

FOOD GROUP: Milk and milk products

Often:

Nonfat milk
Lowfat milk
Lowfat cottage cheese
Lowfat yogurt
Buttermilk made from skim or lowfat milk
Nonfat or lowfat dry milk
Lowfat cheeses such as ricotta and mozzarella

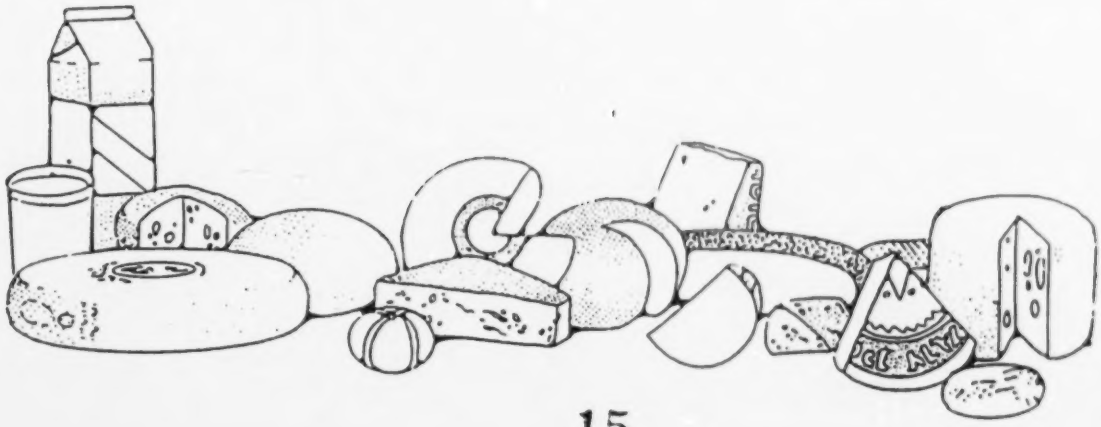
Sometimes:



Cheese made with whole milk
Whole milk
Frozen yogurt
Sherbet
Ice milk
Pudding made with nonfat milk
Flan or custard made with nonfat milk
"Light" ice cream (7% fat)

Rarely:

Ice cream
Sour cream
Cream cheese
Half and half
Chocolate milk
Heavy cream/whipped cream



FOOD GROUP: Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, and nuts

Often:

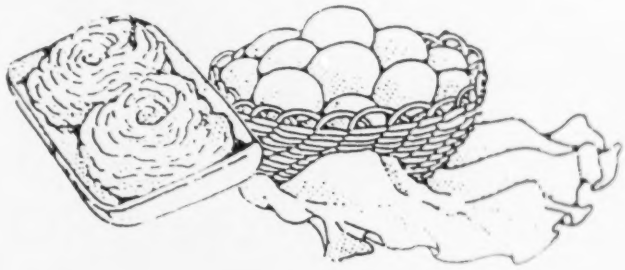
Well-trimmed, lean cuts of beef, pork, veal, and lamb
Chicken and turkey without skin, including ground turkey
Fish and shellfish (other than fried)
Peas (split, chick, black-eyed)
Almonds, beechnuts, brazil nuts, filberts, pecans, walnuts
Pumpkin and sunflower seeds
Beans
Hamburger (made from a lean cut such as the beef round)
Tuna canned in water
Refried beans made without lard

Sometimes:

Eggs
Peanut butter
Peanuts, pistachios, cashews, macadamia nuts

Rarely:

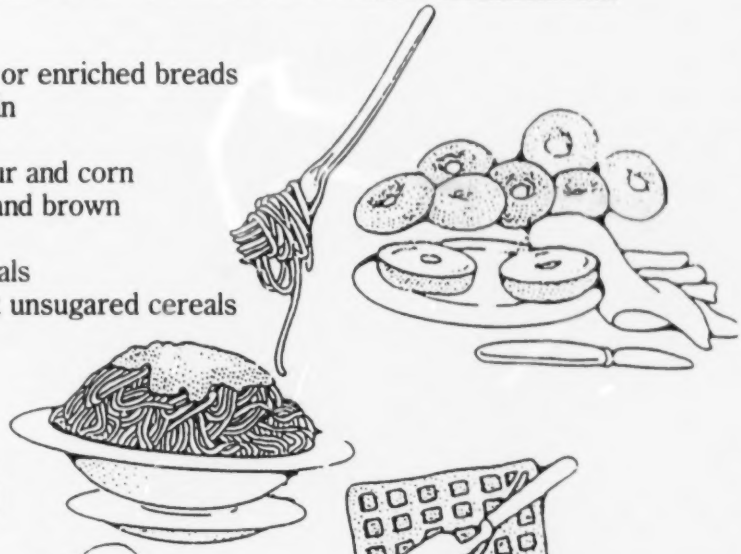
Bacon
Corned beef
Sausage
Frankfurters
Bologna
Salami
Chitterlings
Deep fried chicken
Deep fried fish
Tuna canned in oil
Hamburger or regular ground beef
Refried beans made with lard



FOOD GROUP: Breads and cereals

Often:

Whole grain or enriched breads
English muffin
Bagels
Tortillas, flour and corn
Rice, white and brown
Pita bread
Cooked cereals
Ready-to-eat unsugared cereals
Spaghetti
Macaroni
Noodles
Matzo
Bread sticks
Grits, boiled

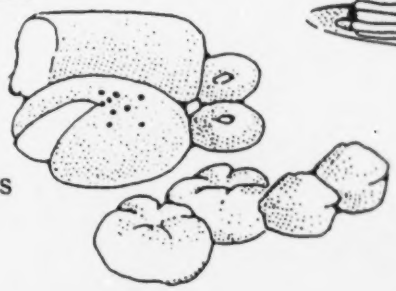


Sometimes:

Biscuits
Pancakes
Waffles
Saltines
Oyster crackers
Pretzels
Graham crackers
Quick breads
Granola

Rarely:

Croissants
Doughnuts
Sweet rolls
Ready-to-eat sugared cereals
Cheese crackers
Pastries
Corn chips
Tortilla chips
Granola bars
Fried grits
Snack crackers



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FOOD GROUP: Fruits and vegetables

Often:

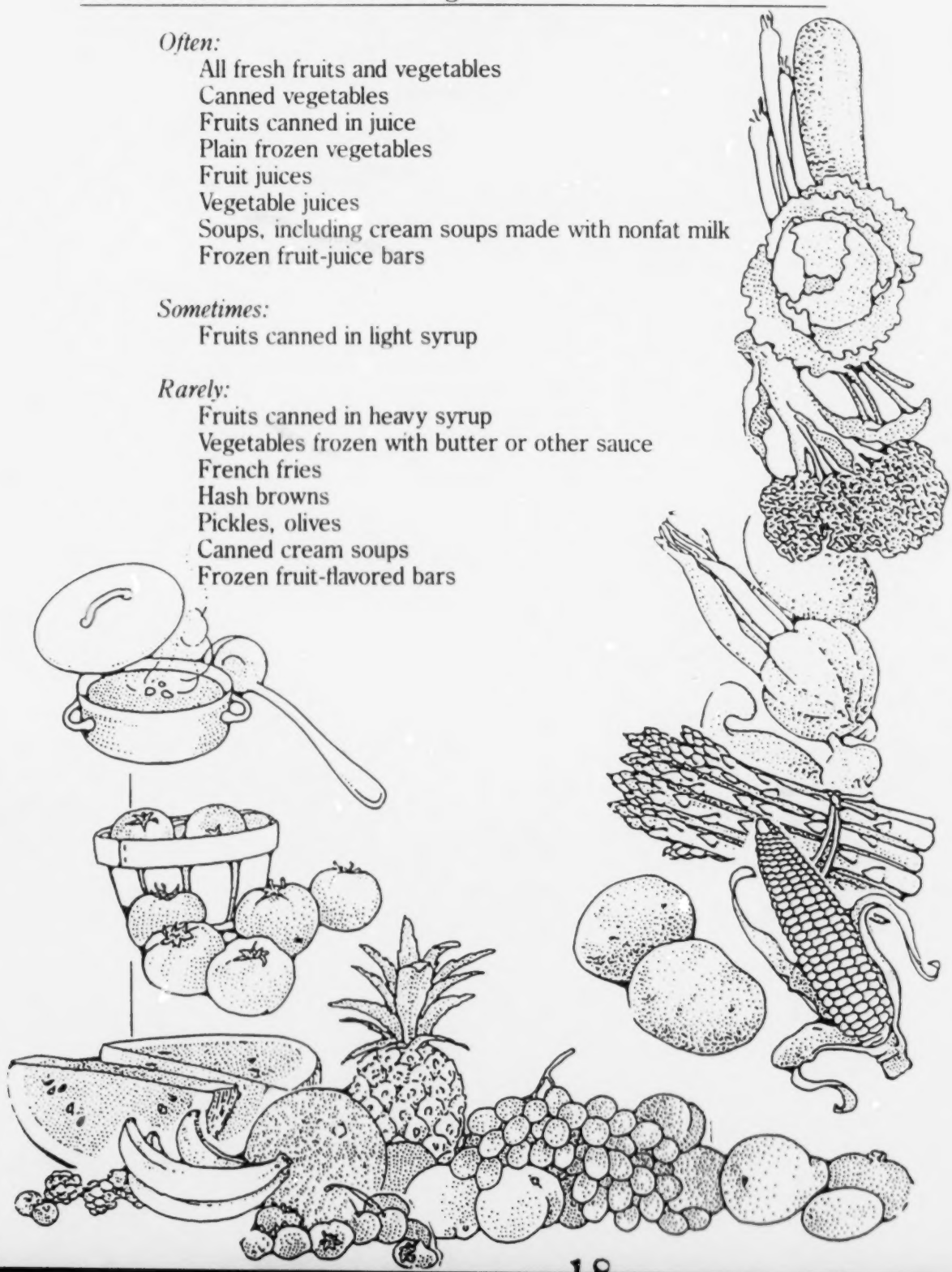
All fresh fruits and vegetables
Canned vegetables
Fruits canned in juice
Plain frozen vegetables
Fruit juices
Vegetable juices
Soups, including cream soups made with nonfat milk
Frozen fruit-juice bars

Sometimes:

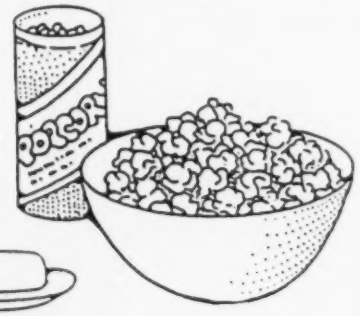
Fruits canned in light syrup

Rarely:

Fruits canned in heavy syrup
Vegetables frozen with butter or other sauce
French fries
Hash browns
Pickles, olives
Canned cream soups
Frozen fruit-flavored bars

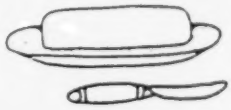


FOOD GROUP: Sweets, fats, and snack foods



Often:

Popcorn (unbuttered)

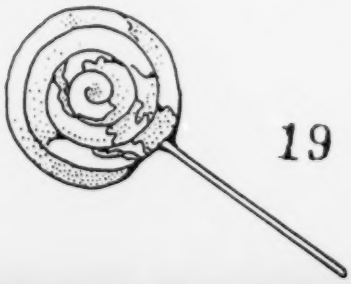


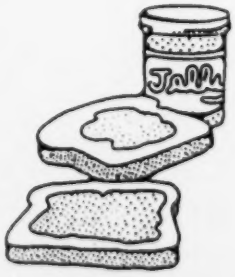
Sometimes:

Margarines
Diet margarines
Safflower oil
Sunflower oil
Corn oil
Cottonseed oil
Soybean oil
Salad dressing made with the above oils
Mayonnaise made with above oils
Artificially sweetened beverages
Cookies (preferably without icing)

Rarely:

Butter
Lard
Bacon drippings
Coconut oil
Palm oil
Ham hocks
Salt pork
Blue cheese or roquefort salad dressing
Salad dressing made with sour cream or cheese
Candies
Chocolate
Honey
Sugars
Jams, jellies, marmalade
Sweet gelatin
Soft drinks
Fruit drinks
Fruit punch
Fruit ades
Fruit-flavored beverages
Sauces
Gravies





HOW FOOD IS PREPARED MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Preferred methods of food preparation are baking, boiling, steaming, broiling, and stir frying in a nonstick pan using little, if any, fat. Pan frying and deep fat frying are not recommended, as these methods of food preparation greatly increase the fat and thus the calorie value of food.

Breading or coating, sauces, and gravies add unnecessary calories to food.

Herbs and spices can improve the taste of many foods and are very low in calories.

Any visible fat should be trimmed from meat and poultry. The skin should be removed from poultry before cooking.

Solidified fat can be skimmed from soups and stews after leaving them in the refrigerator overnight.

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Ask about *If My Child Is too Fat, What Should I Do about It?*

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